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Chapter

STICKS AND STONES: ONLY SKIN DEEP AFTER ALL!

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ABSTRACT

A personal account of being bullied as an immigrant offers insights on systemic racial discrimination within educational institutions and the wider Australian society. The personal experiences reveal that emotional and psychological abuse can transcend childhood and plague an individual in adult life. Discrimination regrettably will never be eradicated, and so resolution requires effort at the level of the individual who is the victim. The story demonstrates that racial jibes and taunts – even little ones – can be very painful, very harmful and even life-changing. The consequences may be enduring. Scars can remain and hurts may resurface, prompted, for instance, by innocuous and jocular remarks. The passage from victim to victor is a process, one that can be very long. Reflection, acceptance, humor, stoicism and resilience help, but the victim's pain, suffering and sense of aloneness may continue to derail the process. The path to peace of mind, growth and maturity requires ongoing efforts to nurture resilience. When self-esteem is strong, the author acknowledges she has learned much, especially to appreciate the finer points of the phrase of her native tongue: "Vive la différence".

INTRODUCTION¹

Shame and ignominy! "How can I face others after this humiliating gaffe? I hate math with a passion! I will never get these stupid Algebraic equations."

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¹ It is said that there may be a cathartic effect of writing a personal narrative. Certainly writing this chapter has brought some solace to my soul, and helped me see a few lessons I have learned along the way. One lesson is for myself. Recovery from victimhood is possible and owes much to personal development, and much of that is facilitated by others. The other lesson is one for others, that educators, pupils and others might understand that name-calling and bullying on the basis of color, creed or nationality really do hurt and can cause long-term damage. I have used pseudonyms to protect the identity of individuals in this narrative.

I stared into space, aghast, but defiant and prayed that the floor would open up to swallow me. The nun's voice reverberated in my mind: controlling, abusive and authoritative, rebuking and belittling me in front of my peers. I stared rebelliously at my math teacher whose formidable and overbearing tirade belied the gentle, compassionate figure she portrayed to the outside world in her nun's habit.

The physical insult simply added to my mortification. My agony was as palpable as the thud of her math text as it crashed down on my head! Laughing contemptuously in my private world, my innermost thoughts were in a language she could not understand: "*Ah ha! Tu l'as mérité, vilaine! Ton bouquin s'est cassé en deux!*" ("Serves you right you nasty woman! You have broken the spine of your book!")

My insolence did not go unnoticed but was fortunately not fully comprehended. Had Sister been privy to my secret thoughts, I would surely have been expelled. Another blessing was that as my face and neck flushed in shame, I was thankful to not be white-skinned, otherwise the effect of the nun's intimidation would have been ten times more visible to everyone. Camouflage was my secret weapon and just as my thoughts were hidden in my head, I would learn to hide behind my brown cloak.

This covert moment of madness gave me cause for wicked delight but alas the sentiment was ephemeral. My retort was of course not uttered aloud but my impertinent attitude, perceptible when provoked, incurred additional punishment that afternoon. I made a mental note to curb my rebellious nature if I wanted to survive this hostile new world. My impudence had earned me sufficient chastisement at home to realize that. I should have known better. My nick-name: *'Ti Piment Rouge* (Little Red Hot Chili) was appropriate for the cheeky little girl I had been in Mauritius but my spirited sense of play had been quashed on arriving in the melting-pot of multi-cultural Australia in the '60s. "Brown is ugly, brown is bad! Migrants are stupid!" Nonetheless, traces of the prankster that I had been peeped through the chink in my self-preservation amour.

This formidable nun had delivered intolerable abuse on an unsuspecting migrant pupil on center stage, at the blackboard in front of the class of thirty-five. "Stupid girl. Didn't you do your homework? This is basic Algebra. How many times do I have to go over this? Go back to your seat! Detention after school!" "Yes Sister", I muttered through clenched teeth, stoically trying to hold back the tears that welled up in my eyes. But they coursed uncontrollably down my face adding yet another failure to those enumerated by Sister.

My thoughts turned to the law of karma, an inexorable force that must be reckoned with! What had I done in a past life to deserve this ridicule and the numerous other injustices sent to test my mettle? How could an innocent child have these thoughts? Was I merely a product of my Catholic education?

Pride comes before a fall they say. I should never have skipped Grade 2 in Mauritius. I was so proud of this achievement. Where did that get me? I had been brought down a peg or two when I arrived in Australia at the age of eight, ready to start Grade 5 when to my chagrin I was peremptorily relegated to Grade 4 because of my lack of proficiency in English and my perceived immaturity. Truth be told, I did not even know how to ask the teacher if I could go to the bathroom!

So I sat there and crossed my legs until recess! I could not communicate my needs to the teacher nor stand up for myself through verbal interaction. Nonetheless, I took umbrage at being returned to Grade 4, particularly as my older sister was appropriately enrolled thanks to the rudimentary English she possessed. I was being punished again!

How does one deal with moments of discomfiture in one's childhood and adult life? What's in a name? Far more disturbing, what are the ramifications of the heavy-handed tactics of educators who ruled with an iron fist a few decades ago? Have the bullies been singled out and fired or brought to justice? I was not spared the indignity of being strapped on occasion, for having disobeyed the teacher in primary school or having been unjustly punished in various ways during my high school years, mostly thanks to my retaliation at being bullied. The embarrassment and disappointment of being excluded from school yard games simply because I was different, or laughed at just like my European friends because of our 'smelly sandwiches' filled with salami and pickles or other delectable *charcuterie* now ironically sought after, were shrugged off with apparent nonchalance but it was not easy to dismiss these moments when rejection meant marginalization; particularly not as a child. The general perception of migrants in those days was that if they could not speak English they were stupid or somewhat mentally impaired. In the heat of the moment, perpetrators strike out to hurt and the victim naturally believes that the hurt will never really disappear.

HURLING WORDS

"Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me!" At the impressionable age of eight, these were the words I repeated endlessly to myself as my little brother and I endured the barrage of vitriol that spouted from the mouths of children who attended the State school opposite ours. When I reported the continuous litany of insults that awaited us as we left our school in the afternoons, the teacher was dismissive and simply offered the retort above. Simple! She had suggested that I simply ignore the abuse and refrain from retaliating physically or verbally. She had apparently never had her identity challenged and could not see that these disrespectful jibes were inciting me to anger and defeating my efforts to fit in. You would have to be a saint to remain kind and good-natured under such circumstances! Had this teacher really imagined that passivity would halt the bullying to which we were subjected on a daily basis? However when viewed from a different perspective, these were the attitudes of the times and I was powerless to change them. When my youngest sister started school she too was subject to such racial abuse and today she still bears the scars of these painful days. The three kilometer walk home was a nightmare until the abominable young louts had run out of invectives. "Go back where you came from little black Sambos! You darkies don't belong here! You're Wogs not Aussies!" had become commonplace. I could not understand these injustices but I was defenseless before these tirades.

In reprisal, with what little English I had acquired, I retorted with the phrase my teacher had taught me, but this proved futile for the perpetrators would take aim with stones as projectiles. My efforts to meet their insults with my own were so feeble that I became the butt of their mirth. "You are white as milk! You are awful, horrible children," were my timid offerings, short of expletives not yet added to my limited lexicon, and delivered with a strong French accent. They did little to assuage my pain. Such retorts in fact appeared to create more fuel for the fire. When one is in pain one often lashes out at loved ones.

My older sister, Josiane looked completely different to us, yet still bore the family resemblance. I would tell her "*Toi, tu es blanche. Tout le monde t'aime. On a dû t'adopter. Ne marche pas avec nous!*" ("You are white. Everyone loves you. You must have been adopted.

Don't walk with us!"). Our mixed cultural heritage, French, Scottish, Portuguese and Italian, and the olive skin color of my parents may shed light on this issue. Three children out of four have brown skin, one, Josiane, has white skin. Without realizing it, I was committing the same sin as my despised antagonists although I did not see it as such. The recurrent verbal attacks on my cultural identity had reinforced my inferiority complex in a society where white Anglo-Australians ruled and this sadly provoked my shameful behavior as reflected in the way I treated my white-skinned sibling.

My spiteful attitude toward my sister haunts me to this day. I was essentially no better than those who abused me! But such was my pain. My poor sister, Josiane fortunately accepted the cruel lashing she received from her siblings.

Perspicacious and conciliatory by nature (today she still assumes the role of mediator in family squabbles and rivalry), she did not respond with insults and just let me and my brown skinned siblings vent our anger. She evidently felt sorry for us. Had it not been for her beautiful and generous spirit, we may not be such close friends today. Josiane considered herself fortunate to have found a perfect fit in the Australian society which was manifestly failing to discard the shameful era of the White Australia Policy.

Paradoxically, many years after these troubling times, Josiane spent a great deal of time in the sun so that she too could get the glorious tan so many people ironically craved and that we her siblings had by nature! How the wheel has turned, it has become fashionable to sport a beautifully tanned body even while warnings about the risk of skin cancer lamentably fail to convince young people especially, that sunbaking, yes baking in the Australian sun, is seriously damaging to their health.

RECURRENCE AND REGRESSION

Memories of my years of tertiary studies and teacher training in Melbourne are imbued with pride and satisfaction when I consider my achievements by the age of twenty, but they are equally tinged with sadness and disenchantment in an ambience ironically defined as multicultural Australia. I cringe at the image that my first day of teaching rounds conjures and wonder how I actually managed to become a teacher, let alone remain one and progress through the ranks to university professor today.

During my final year at University, in Melbourne, I fancied myself a mature woman of twenty, newly married to a fellow migrant, recently graduated teacher and I finally felt good about myself. I congratulated myself for having overcome the obstacles that had hindered my progress toward a recognizable identity. I had achievements of which I was proud: excellent results at university; was a proficient linguist in four languages; was paid to study while at university and obtained two scholarships in addition, had a guaranteed teaching position in a high school upon my graduation; and a prestigious scholarship to teach in France followed soon thereafter.

Teaching practicum in a Year 8 classroom of a beach side suburb of Melbourne would prove testing despite being under the tutelage of an amazingly talented and inspirational supervisor. As she psyched me into a calm state prior to my first lesson, rather unsuccessfully I might add, I reviewed my meticulously prepared lesson plan. I am a perfectionist and I was impeccably dressed with a power suit that would give me additional confidence. These

measures were employed to mitigate the nerve-wracking effects that this component of the course had on me. I tried to dissimulate my tension and nervousness and approached the blackboard with an attitude I hoped symbolized determination and self-assurance.

As I wrote my name on the board, snickering voices from the front seat reached my incredulous ears “Ha ha! We’ve got a Choc for a teacher!”

“Oh no, not again! Please God, let this be a mistake!” I silently prayed as I held back the tears that threatened to ruin my career before it had even begun. Alas, there was no mistaking the audible laughter that erupted throughout the room. My hand was suspended in time, incapable of finishing the task. I cannot recall how long it actually took for me to regain my composure because the only thing I desired was for the floor to open up and swallow me entirely so that I could escape the torment that was occurring all over again. I was hurled back to my childhood days where I had been consumed with self-doubt, where disrespect was all I had been worthy of, incapable of functioning as a normal human being. I cannot explain how I extricated myself from this nightmare except for the belief that my Guardian Angel had assumed control of the situation. As if in a trance, suspended from above in an out of body experience, in total disbelief and with complete objectivity, I observed the unfolding dramatization that was being enacted on the stage that was my classroom. Imperturbably and in control, I marveled at my doppelganger, the trainee-teacher and actress incarnate who greeted the mischievous chortling children with a smile and faultlessly delivered the perfect French class, or so recounted my supervisor. Her discomfiture at witnessing the tragic beginning of my career was profound and only when I had reached the sanctuary of her car to go home, did I break down and allow myself to be consoled and cajoled into believing that I had the skills to become a competent language instructor.

OBSESSING ABOUT SKIN COLOR

In the '60s in Australia, multiculturalism was not endorsed by the society. Those who did not have the privilege of being white had to endure xenophobia that lasted decades. Those who find resonance with my story will understand the feeling of dejection that was all-consuming for me. I might scrub my skin until I bled, I would never be white and I would never be truly accepted and respected. On a lighter note, I could on the other hand resort to ridiculous antics to avoid the sun so that I did not get darker. The darker I became, the more abuse I had to endure. Learning to become a sun dodger is quite a skill that requires a degree of imperiousness when avoiding the sun is of overriding importance. To the point of selecting the most advantageous seat on a terrace cafe or worse, during chance encounters on the street, tactically positioning myself with the sun behind me whilst my interlocutor bears the full brunt of the midday sun. It gets worse.

I became an expert at this game. Over the last few years, whilst walking around the lake in the early afternoon in summer when a cap would not shield exposed surfaces of my neck and face, I adjusted my gait, strategically placing myself in my new partner's shadow. Thankfully Andrew is taller than me but the crazy dance I performed raised many eyebrows if I was caught unawares. My predictable reaction provided more fodder for Andrew, who never missed the chance to press my buttons because as he said: “You bite so easily.” He never tired of reiterating

“That’s where you belong! Two paces behind me!” said tongue in cheek but shameless nonetheless.

Playing tennis in the afternoons without changing sides is a rule I established with my opponents years ago. As I play singles with male colleagues who love the sun, I have to this day not had much dissension on account of my crazy capers. They never seem to mind bearing the full impact of the setting sun on their faces during the match as they generally end up exacting their revenge on me by beating me anyhow! I have thus achieved my objectives and no one is the worse for wear!

Just when I had begun to accept that my skin color could at last bring me an advantage, the following remark promptly put me back in my place, the intimidating comment coming from a white Australian male “You consider yourself lucky? You’re not tanned, you’re just a funny shade of brown!” Mud sticks! My aversion for the sun has taken inventive measures over the years to avoid racial bullying.

And then there is reverse bullying. I must confess that at every possible opportunity I have tried to protect my daughters from the full sun, to avoid unwelcome stares and insensitive comments that I thought might affect them. Evidently, I have failed miserably as reflected in their predilection to sunbathe. My obsession with sun avoidance bordered on hysteria when one considers the lengths I went to, encouraging them to escape the damaging and lasting effects it produces. However, even inculcating a fear of skin cancer produced the opposite reaction so I long since abandoned this approach.

I tried to turn my daughters into a replica of their mother and I dodged the sun at every opportunity and covered up to the point of ridicule. My daughters were in fact a reflection of the child I had been in Mauritius; I had adored the tropical sun, the surf, the sand and the sea. My desire to avoid the sun to avoid racial jibes had become an obsession that affected others.

My ex-husband, Peter and I took a day trip to a little island whilst on holidays in the Greek islands. The uneasy journey on the exposed little speed boat at 9.00 AM was no doubt the precursor of what was to come. The tourism bureau had embellished this eight hour excursion on this little island paradise. We were to be collected at 5.00 PM after a day of frolicking in crystal clear waters of the Aegean Sea. As we approached the island, we marveled at the seals on the rocks around the bay where the pier jutted out to the sea. The nearer we came, the more panic-stricken I became and it was not only because of sea sickness. Shock horror! What seals? These were naked people baking in the morning sun. “Oh my God! No way!” I yelled out a little more loudly than I had intended. “This is a nudist beach! There is no way I am staying here all day. Where is the shade? There is not one single tree on this little island. I want to go back to Santorini.” “Don’t be so ridiculous!” my ex-husband answered. “You Micks (Catholics) are such prudes! We can’t go back. We won’t be refunded for canceling. Just put up with it. You always have to ruin everything.” I retorted “What are we supposed to eat and drink? They didn’t tell us there was no kiosk on the island. We only have a bottle of water.” His final quip was “Get over it! If you are going to be so stupid, if you want to spoil our holiday, go back on your own!”

In spite of my rebellious nature, I lacked the courage to stand up for my convictions. But I was decidedly not happy! I stared in awe at the amazing diversity that comprised the human body, aesthetically enhanced bodies and their counterparts, circumcision and its antithesis finally becoming clearer to the inexperienced young woman that I was. As we weaved our way across crisply baking bodies strewn over the beach to a selected spot, I could not take my eyes off the wind surfing instructor who unashamedly and boldly strutted his stuff on his board as it

glided unhindered across the glistening bay. He hopped on and off as he coached his students, every one of them of course, stark naked. Peter stripped off, after all, when in Rome, or should I say Greece? He plunged into the inviting blue waters of the Aegean Sea. The only concession I was willing to make was going *monokini*. With only my brief bikini bottoms left securely in place, I quickly raced into the water to cool down and after five minutes, fully aware that I would tan much more quickly in the sea, I walked towards my towel. Whilst Peter settled down to a day of sunbathing, ignoring our grumbling stomachs from the hunger pangs that had manifested, I started to cover up. The sight was something to behold. There lay a brown skinned woman on a nudist beach, covered from head to toe! I was decked out in a sun hat, sunglasses and the statutory light-weight, long-sleeved grey blouse that protected me from the sun all around Europe. Assuming a lying position on the beach, I covered all remaining exposed surfaces of my body with my beach towel. My ex-husband exploded: "Do you have any idea what you look like? You look like a freaking pervert! You are such a prude!" It suddenly dawned on me that Peter was right and we burst out laughing. What would people think? However, I was, by that stage also frustrated with hunger, insatiable thirst and the scorching heat that I thought I would faint.

I survived this expedition on the nudist beach but I would never forgive Peter for this. Well, that was the intention at the time. Needless to say, we were sunburnt, even with my efforts to hide from the sun but I must admit that in retrospect the funny side to this story is indisputable. The spectacle I made would have been priceless. Who would have thought brown people could sport a burnt, peeling nose!

To make matters worse, my ex-husband's slide show on the big screen of my parents' home subsequent to our year abroad still makes me wince and squirm to this day. The surprise exhibition of an image taken through his telephoto lens of their daughter arising from the sea topless produced initial shock in me and my family. It was followed by a wild guffaw as I vainly attempted to hide my image from the sniggering siblings whilst cursing the ex and threatening him with divorce! I can now laugh at this without wincing, but it took some time to forgive and forget. Maybe the eventual divorce from my ex-husband has helped but I must admit that the disappearance of the offending slide is a worry!

GLOBAL NOMAD

In the '70s, my ex-husband and I, both naturalized Australians, had been granted a prestigious scholarship to teach in French *lycées*, high schools, for a year as English Assistants. This was quite a coup as only seven people from the State of Victoria had been selected that year for these competitive positions granted by the French Embassy. This was significant for me and surely recognition that even migrants could excel in their endeavors and break through discrimination. At the age of eight, I had achieved the proficiency, fluency and accent of the native Australian-English speaker. In fact, at the end of my first year in Australia I had received an award for my rapid acquisition of English and was very proud of that moment. The accolades I have accumulated over the years give me reason to reflect on the fortuitous events that have brightened my existence in Australia. They stand in stark contrast to the painful episodes in my life, countering the feelings of diminished self-esteem. These achievements remind us that the people in my adoptive country are certainly not all racist and not all the time racist. Perhaps in

a more complex manner, my pride in having risen above adversity (despite my race and esteem which are more my issue than theirs) echoes my hurt pride when my race and self-esteem are challenged. Am I overly-sensitive? It would appear so. I humbly submit that they are both me and my reaction. Maybe I had greater need to turn the other cheek as my sister had done and grow a thicker skin? Easier said than done however! I am clearly a work in progress.

I headed to Europe for a big adventure, a proud Australian citizen believing that this nationality was well liked on that continent. Sporting a recognizably educated Australian accent, I was excited and prepared for my intercultural experiences. These sentiments were sadly transitory.

My lack of acceptance as a Franco-Mauritian-Australian in my childhood days had had an effect on me. In spite of my hybrid nationality, I proudly announced to the British that I was Australian. This was by then, the early '80s. Australia was multicultural, right? Times had changed. The rollercoaster ride that defines my search for an identity can be scrutinized from the peaks and troughs that correlate with the moments of sheer jubilation and depths of despair, respectively. I had buried the past, or so I thought. I was now happy to consider myself Australian. Not for long, however. It was shortly after reaching England that I made a conscious decision to reject my newly-found identity because I could not countenance being asked with irritating regularity "Oh! But where are you really from? You don't look Australian. Are you Indian?"

The French people I met taunted me also with questions about my heritage. A French shop assistant made what she deemed to be an informed comment when I spoke to her "*Oh! Le p'tit accent des colonies! Que c'est mignon! Vous êtes de La Guadeloupe?*" ("Oh, the little accent from the colonies! How cute! Are you from Guadeloupe?") The intonation pattern that I had involuntarily adopted when speaking French whilst growing up in Australia was different from the French of the *Métropole* and evidently discernible to the French ear.

I had congratulated myself on having finally established my cultural identity within the context of multicultural Melbourne. I had, to my satisfaction, proved to my peers, my family, to anyone who cared to criticize, that even brown people could graduate from university with honors. I had a respectable position as Head of French and Spanish at a newly established high school in my region where I was given *carte blanche* to develop the language programs during challenging times when foreign language pedagogy struggled to maintain relevance. The hegemony of English was firmly entrenched globally and Anglo-Saxon students objected to mandatory foreign language learning proclaiming that it was the duty of others to speak English. As the prevailing attitudes were no different where their parents were concerned, it was hard to instill into their children the value of learning a foreign language and culture, to make them interculturally aware, to teach them about integrity, tolerance and cultural ambiguity. Lamentably, little has changed.

Everywhere and everyone treated me as a foreigner. "Nice to meet you Marie-Claire. So, what part of Pakistan are you from?" is a common comment that confounds me. My reply to these comments is handled with the disdain I believe they deserve, if only to defend against discrimination against Indians and Pakistanis. I am ashamed to say that I can rarely control my tongue when people mistake my identity. It is unkind on my part to react so strongly but after years of defending my nationality, I still have a clear identity crisis. In Europe, bombarded with comments that questioned my identity, I made a strenuous effort to change any feature that branded me as Australian.

Then I returned to Australia and faced a whole new set of negative remarks and comments. I had now adopted an English accent, although my vernacular remained largely Australian, and I dressed with European sophistication and flair, at least in my view. I found myself consciously rejecting any connection to Australia even though I had lived here for most of my life and was (and am) grateful for the opportunities she has afforded me. I unfortunately still feel like a fish out of water at times.

I was experiencing the negative effects associated with re-entry to one's home culture, an area of research that I investigated in my Ph.D (Patron, 2006). My best friends seemed foreign and removed from me. After perfunctory inquiries about the experiences I had lived through during my year in Europe, they turned their attention to more pressing matters, none of which included me. Nothing was ever the same again. I had been homesick while away, so excited to return home to be with my colleagues and friends once again. However, I had left and they had stayed. They had moved on. Was their lack of interest genuine or jealousy? Their intransigence towards the cultural learning I had experienced and the perceptible changes in me were soul destroying. However, this confronting feature also forms part of the predictable phases that returned sojourners face when they go home (Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1963; Storti, 2001b; Weaver, 1994). Ultimately, I did not negotiate the re-entry well, and after a year back in Australia, my ex-husband and I returned to Europe to establish a new life in Spain.

During the year I returned to Australia, I consciously accepted that my new persona did not fit into the Australian context. I was readjusting by holding a plan to leave. I was marking time until all of my financial, familial and educational obligations had been fulfilled and then left again. I refused to abandon my 'new look', donning instead my armor to protect myself from the pain of being in the out-group once again. I made new friends knowing full well that I would never see them again because I was moving to Spain indefinitely. The arrangements for my teaching upon my return went awry and merely reinforced my decision to depart again. The school term I had included a Grade 8 English class comprising a contingent of some of the most troublesome children in the school. It was paradoxically the worst and the most liberating of my teaching career.

This group of unruly children enabled my catharsis as I unleashed my pent up rage at their bullying of a poor little Indian boy. They treated him with condescension, mockery and disrespect for a week before I exploded. To their extreme bewilderment, my repressed anger that had been locked away for years poured forth on the whole class for their torment of the migrant child. This was a lesson I had not planned but I am relieved to say my message was delivered swiftly and surely as tears of remorse became visible on the faces of the perpetrators. The experience was emancipating and I felt a yoke lifted from my shoulders. I had a new sense of purpose that transformed my pain, empowering me to channel my energies toward awareness of intercultural issues. Sincere apologies were proffered by the offenders to the victim in a spirit of genuine friendship and inclusion. My actions had induced a cultural shift in the minds of those children who now understood that tolerance, empathy and respect belonged to everyone, in spite of skin color or creed.

One of the cheekiest pupils of the group was a blond, good looking and talented boy of twelve and he of course commanded the attention of the whole class, especially the girls. He was not part of the offending crew so it was difficult to discipline him for his disruptive behavior because beneath the surface he was in fact the classroom jester. I therefore could not quite work out how to take the sassy remark he made to me as he left that day. "See you tomorrow, Black Beauty." Was this a backhanded compliment? Was it disrespectful? I must

admit my sense of humor got the better of me and I missed the chance to scold him when I burst out laughing. As we laughed, I felt somehow freed from the shackles that had held me in a vice-like grip for decades and I realized that there was no malice in his comment. Wow! He thought that I was attractive! How odd! I had chosen to focus on the positive in that instance and the result was therapeutic.

SOME SLOW PROGRESS

After eight years in Spain, I made my second “return” to Australia. The process of re-adjustment seemed easier, precisely because I had experienced reverse culture shock before, and this in spite of the fact that my life was fraught with difficulties of a more personal nature. I finally found my niche, ensconced within the microcosm of a private educational establishment and am still there today, 24 years on.

I have to admit that I still have an acute identity crisis. I consider it a result of being challenged at important stages of my life as to the person that I was, but perhaps my experience has really made me a global nomad.

When I think back to my childhood, I grimace at the memory of the countless times I was treated with derision and injustice, degraded in the process simply because of the color of my skin, my cultural distinction, my occasional linguistic *faux pas* or my perceived naïveté. The pain has faded fortunately especially when I realize that English is only my third language, as there are many expressions lost in translation. Speaking in public or in front of my peers remains my *bête noire*. There are vestiges of a French accent in my English discourse and at least a few expressions that assist in classifying my Francophone origins. To my chagrin, the other forms of abuse based on cultural ambiguity or skin color that have left their mark have not been as easy to eradicate. A work in progress definitely.

I accept that speaking English and four Latin languages is no mean feat. No less a feat was achieving this while my spirit was constantly dampened by negativity and messages that I was not that bright. Even my achievements are challenged: “You speak five languages. So, does that make you intelligent? Where will that get you?” They provoke doubt about my self-worth and a general sense of failure.

However, my achievements and perhaps even more, this narrative, offers me proof that I can rise above the calumnies directed at me by ignorant individuals. The challenges I have faced are daunting, but they are character-building and they promote personal growth.

ONGOING PIQUE AT THE PERPETRATORS

Sport based on insensitive teasing can have an effect on the personality and self-respect of a naïve and trusting person. Remarks made in jest are not always as inoffensive as the offender purports them to be. Indeed, they may simply hide a stealthy intolerant or racist attitude. I was not safe from injurious comments even in my home. I was putting dark colored laundry in the wash and innocently asked my partner, Andrew, if he had anything for a dark wash. The quick-witted response hit its mark: “What! Haven’t you had a shower yet?” On this occasion, I burst out laughing. However, his seemingly humorous, racist remarks had escalated over the years.

Maybe I was an easy target and I had allowed the situation to affect me adversely, but this did not exonerate him.

Nonetheless, I had given him this power over me. Perennial references reinforced our partnership of Male White Caucasian and foreign Female. I reflected on my dear ex-mother-in-law's words; yes she is still very dear to me, when she employed a phrase that is imbued in cultural undertones. "It's a case of *white ant fever*, dear! We see that a lot back home." This term in her country of origin was used to describe the measures some colored women utilized in their quest to marry a white man and bear white children. This is not uncommon in societies where people of European heritage and indigenous populations co-exist harmoniously.

I began to wonder if I had unconsciously fallen victim to this behavioral paradigm when I consider that virtually every relationship I have ever been in has been with a blue or green-eyed, white Caucasian and fair-to-blond man. Was this merely attraction to features that were diametrically opposed to mine or had I instinctively attempted to prevent discrimination toward my daughters for the indignities I had suffered in my youth on the basis of skin color?

I am faced by constant reminders that I will never be truly Australian. A couple of years ago, as I walked hand in hand with my partner, Andrew, along a busy street in our suburb, a four-wheel drive full of young Australian males drove past us and slowed down only to taunt "Can I have some Chockie too?" This was just another to add to the long anthology of hurtful incidents that have defined my existence and undermined by self-esteem.

Even the highlights are barbed. I am proud of my achievements in my university. I am not only a skilled linguist, a university professor but also a single mother with two children. A pinnacle of this journey was when I was selected as 'Academic Mother of the Year' by my university's marketing team for the local paper on Mother's Day.

As I read the paper where my photograph was published with my two daughters, I incredulously discovered that the obvious interpretation of this media report was the portrayal of an ambitious career woman who dared to have a social life outside of her motherly responsibilities, in essence, a career-woman who had become successful at the expense of her children's welfare. How gullible had I been to trust the journalist who interviewed me and had praised me for my devotion to my girls, my sacrifices to maintain onerous private school fees and unrelenting determination to ensure that my daughters were properly cared for by my parents and best friend whilst I pursued my goals. The trajectory of my life and endeavors were there in print for all to criticize.

The insecurities that plagued my childhood are rarely far away. The story presented an opportunity for others to question my motives for advancement, my pursuit of a better life for me and my children. The female journalist's story felt like emotional abuse. I succumbed to feelings of Catholic guilt, for having ambitions, for pursuing my career, for having had a social life.

CONCLUSION

If my narrative is an erratic, chaotic chronicle of childhood, adolescence, youthful adult and more recent memories, it is because life is a messy mosaic, muddled and patterned at the same time. Some memories are laden with sadness and despair, others with jubilation and humor. This narrative is defined more by emotionally-charged and painful memories. The

diverse vignettes represent a layering of incidents. They capture the rollercoaster ride that depicts my life journey from troubled teenager through emerging adulthood to the individual I am today. The pain and psychological scarring that I have experienced through racial and emotional abuse over the years may appear different from the torment suffered by those who have been physically abused but they are just as important. I count my blessings that physical violence is not part of my narrative. Nonetheless, my identity crisis and the profound sentiments of unworthiness and lack of belonging that immigrants like me have endured cannot be understated or dismissed as inconsequential.

Physical abuse is obviously harmful, but emotional abuse is too. And whether it is enacted on the premise of color, creed or philosophical beliefs, rejecting others, casting them into an out-group can have long lasting ramifications and can be deleterious to psychological health and wellbeing.

This is my story. It is the portrayal of my emotional and physical reactions, illustrating how psychological abuse and racial jibes and taunts – even little ones – can be very painful, very harmful and even life-changing. Emotional abuse, manipulative, controlling, inhibitive, intimidating behavior is just as serious as physical abuse. What differentiates the two is perhaps the sensitivity of the individual. A stick or stone applied with sufficient force at the right point will break skin, fracture a bone; while names and insults may affect some more deeply than others.

Some victims of emotional abuse are victorious in burying the past, in forgetting or forgiving the injustices they have borne. Perhaps like my sister Josiane. Perhaps it is luck, perhaps it is their nature. But my story is about those who live with the constant reminder that they are simply not good enough. Policy and laws endeavor to redress the prejudices, but the problem remains.

I have felt my personal and cultural identity perennially challenged. The words of others have manipulated me and influenced my belief so that at times, I have felt worthless. And the cycle feeds on itself. Victims of emotional abuse can often end up in toxic relationships; they cannot extricate themselves from the situation because they believe that no one else will want them. They see themselves as defective and inferior – or so they can readily believe based on a thoughtless comment or insult from family, friend, colleague or stranger. The victim replays each and every painful past incident, the hurt is revisited repeatedly. The perpetrators batter their victims' self-esteem, and the victims come to believe that they deserve this treatment because it is somehow their fault.

Though circumstances have changed since the '60s and '70s when "southern Europeans copped the brunt of ugly racial attacks" (Jagirdar, 2010), it is undeniable that racism is still rife. Perhaps it will always be so, especially against people who are easily identifiable by their color, dress code or religious affiliations. However, even terms of racial abuse that single out those that are different tend to be indiscriminating. In the '60s, "wogs" was a term generally considered to refer to immigrants from southern European, Turkish or Lebanese backgrounds (Tsolidis and Pollard, 2009). But that did not stop its use against me and my family, Franco-Mauritians. The term however has softened, even being used as a symbol of difference and a platform for ethnic-based humor as in the stage play *Wogs out of work* and the film *Wog boy*. That these works were written and starred Australian immigrants perhaps highlights that humor adopted by the victim can be an effective strategy for building resiliency (Sholl, 2011) and for dismantling or at least undermining stereotypically-based discrimination. When I can laugh at myself, others are no longer hurting me.

Another element of healing arises in the realization that I cannot change the past. When I can accept previous circumstances in light of prevailing attitudes of the times, I can begin to forgive those who have offended me. It is effectively only when I can reconcile the issues of the past that I can move forward and allow my burdens to become lighter. Or at least, this has been my experience, although that experience has been hard-won.

Assimilation into another culture takes time. Trying to fit in represents a pressing goal for the children of immigrants particularly in a multicultural ambience such as Australia where individuals must negotiate multiple identities through their differing language attitudes and behaviors across and within a number of discourse settings (Blackledge and Pavlenko, 2001). Their intercultural contact situations may consequently affect the re-negotiation of their cultural identity. Blackledge and Pavlenko argue language ideologies have a significant impact on individuals and groups in different ways which may result in marginalization or general exclusion. Acceptance of one's ethnic practices, language use, and traditions are clearly significant for a successful acculturative experience and a perfect fit or exclusion is evidently contingent on prevailing attitudes of the host society (See also Patron, 2007). I feel like now, I am beginning to fit in. It has taken time but I am comfortable in my (brown) skin. Whilst multiculturalism has ostensibly failed in several countries according to some European leaders, I still rate Australia as unique today in attempting to integrate the multitude of ethnicities. Whilst not perfect by any means, Australians generally tend to live by the credo of multiculturalism; people are more accepting of cultural distinctions than elsewhere on the planet. This is dramatically different from the era in which I grew up in Melbourne.

My developing resilience is born from acceptance of the incidences causing me pain. This has empowered some positive – if painful – change. Whilst I stoically tried to hold back tears when racist taunts threatened to ruin my life or when my identity was challenged it was clear that the trajectory of my path would be long and paved in doubt and difficulty. It was clear to me that one never escapes karma! Life lessons to be learned every step of the way! My self-deprecating sense of humor was a useful weapon in my battles but the immediacy of the occasions where I was emotionally or psychologically abused were devoid of humor as the funny side of situations was not obvious when I was experiencing emotional pain. The continuum between victimhood and victory cannot be expedited impulsively. The process is slow and laborious and often painful but like the tortoise, victory is a possibility.

As this narrative has revealed, the journey has seen me sometimes adopting a vindictive course of action. I humbly admit that at such times I was no better than the rascals who abused me racially or emotionally throughout my life. Over time, I have come to see both the futility of my acts of revenge and the value from the catharsis. It is true that revenge gave me a certain degree of satisfaction. There needed to be a target and I became an expert at hitting back figuratively. I believe that I have confronted this alter ego and in some measure corrected it! I am getting there!

In this personal account (Ellis and Bochner, 2000) although my vulnerability as author is heightened, the foray into my childhood, adolescent and adult memories contributes to discussions on ethical complexities we face when writing and publishing in this area. The experience has been therapeutic and cathartic and if my narrative resonates with other victims of racial, psychological and emotional abuse and increases awareness of the problem I will have achieved my objectives. I do not presume for one instant to compare my situation with those who have endured far more serious atrocities at the hands of perpetrators. However, each and every one of us must deal with our own trials and tribulations and what may appear

inconsequential to others is still very real and painful for the individual in question until they have resolved the pertinent issues. We all have our own unique journeys and our strategies that help us become triumphant. Predicated on Ronai's (1992) "layered account" I have included a diversity of vignettes that "reflect the structure of consciousness. As each layer of text is superimposed on the others, each layer contributes to the understanding of the other layers as well as to the overall picture of social life that the text conveys" (Ronai, 1992. p.116). As Crites (1971, p.300) eloquently puts it "Storytelling is not an arbitrary imposition upon remembered experience, altogether alien to its own much simpler form. Images do not exist in memory as atomic units, like photographs in an album, but as transient episodes in an image-stream, cinematic, which I must suspend and from which I must abstract in order to isolate a particular image".

A realization dawned on me somewhere along the path toward recovery. Resilience was no longer unachievable. When a positive attitude, belief in myself and humor began to replace negative paradigms, an epiphany took place. Whilst my automatic defense of injurious treatment over the years was to use retaliatory remarks to assuage the pain, over time adversity contributed to personal growth and strength of character. I finally understood that as long as my motivation was to hurt the perpetrators I would continue to lose myself, to wallow in my own self-pity. I was essentially using humor as a weapon against the injustices inflicted on me but it left me bereft of joy or satisfaction. When I converted my pain into useful, positive projects that consumed my time, the cloud lifted and I realized that I could overcome misfortune in a personal way instead of allowing it to bury me more deeply into the mire. I focused on study, obtaining four university degrees; I played sport to bolster my physical and mental fitness and my daughters remained my first priority as a single mother. Finally I became a researcher and author, in the process establishing my niche. I had found my sanctuary, losing myself for hours in my own world of writing.

Creative writing and the use of humor are strategies that have contributed enormously to my personal recovery from the traumas that I suffered as a child as a result of the discrimination I encountered in Australia. However, whilst humor was an important part of my therapy, laughing at a given situation was tantamount to deflection, as my deprecating sense of humor assisted in dissimulating my true feelings. I recognize this finally and I am now able to perceive traumatic events as part of the texture of my narrative, events that contributed to the mosaic of my life leading to recovery and resilience. My journey is not yet complete as each time I am goaded I react in a predictable fashion, revisiting the former behavior and I discover that certain issues are still to be healed. When I realize that I am powerless to change the past, when I am able to forgive the perpetrators for their part in decimating my self-esteem, I mark another notch on my belt toward recovery. *C'est la vie!* I can see the silver lining.

In the meantime, I continue to work on my weaknesses, realizing full well that I cannot fight what I cannot control. And indeed there is no more need to fight. If one of the perpetrators in question were to appear in front of me, I would no doubt react automatically but I know my boundaries. I would not inflict pain or abuse on the individual who has hurt me because time has healed and indeed is still healing the hurt. On a personal level, I have recently walked away from an unsatisfactory relationship, not to escape but to make room for someone in my life who celebrates cultural diversity, who appreciates the woman I have become. I am emerging victorious from the state of victimhood because I have let go of negative elements. The painful episodes in my life have contributed to personal growth and I bear no ill will against anyone. I am more self-assured as I represent my university at international conferences. In my role of

lecturer, researcher and author in the intercultural field, I work assiduously to effect change, promote cultural diversity, empathy, tolerance and understanding among cultures. Powerful intercultural alumni networks of friendship, collegiality and professional integrity can thus be validated (Ting and Patron, 2013). I am at peace with myself and no longer fear rejection on the basis of my skin color. The cathartic experience of baring my soul to the world in this narrative has provided me with clarity and vindication of my self-worth. Why would anyone feel the need to prey on my vulnerabilities? Racial jibes now merely appear ridiculous and they are becoming scarcer because they have lost their power to inflict pain.

I had no choice but to move on, careful to avoid being so naïve and gullible in the future. No sense in dwelling on the past any more. Alas, it seems I have been a slow learner. I continued to place my trust in individuals who wooed me with their charm and lulled me into a false sense of security only to watch me surrender to their teasing. The more I reacted, the worse it became. I can honestly say that now, finally, I embody the Phoenix that is steadfastly rising from the fire. Sticks and stones can no longer hurt me. They are just words! I now laugh in the face of denigration! Only skin deep after all!

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